

MARXISM AND BLACK LIBERATION



WHY MARXISM FOR BLACK LIBERATION

1. Black Liberation cannot be achieved under Capitalism

We have learned through some very hard and trying struggles that the barbed wire fence of segregation can be overcome by some and that the pit of poverty can be escaped by a few. But under no stretch of the imagination have we learned how to get rid of racism and poverty (national oppression and class exploitation) for ever-body. Under capitalism it is normal for somebody to be exploited and misused. And for over 200 years, this has certainly included nearly all Black people in the U.S.A. The lesson is that capitalism stinks! Malcolm put it very graphically. "Show me a capitalist and I'll show you a bloodsucker." In this light, Black people have been a blood bank for the U.S. capitalist class

U.S. capitalism has clutched at our throats and grown fat off of us from the very beginning. Indeed, the beginning of the modern (capitalist) period of world history includes the Atlantic slave trade because the blood soaked super-profits derived from it were a decisive fuel for the industrial revolution. In general, merchants amassed great profits both in England and the U.S.A. (New England). These profits were invested in booming industries like textiles, and thereby increased the process of industrialization. For the U.S.A., this led to heightened regional contradictions between the free-farming Midwest, the industrial Northeast, and the slave South. For England, this led to the increased development of the capitalist class and the working class in England fought to abolish U.S. slavery in order to eliminate the unfair competition of their "free" wage labor against slaves who received no pay. In sum, the slave trade had two different aspects: (1) It ripped Africans out of their homeland and cast them down in the inhuman condition of slavery in strange lands (U.S., Caribbean, South America, etc.); (2) It provided the great profits on which industrial capital (the industrial revolution) expanded rapidly in England and the U.S.A. leading to greater exploitation of the entire working class.

Slavery in the U.S. South was a backward pre-capitalist system of production in which exploitation was intensified due to its subordination to the developing world capitalist system, especially in the U.S. North and England. The slave system of production sustained whites as rulers, especially the parasitic and idle class of plantation owners. Slavery oppressed Blacks at a sub-human level. To a slave, the capitalist North (or England) appeared as a promised land because chattel slavery did not exist there. Slavery was the basis of considerable protest and struggle. Frederick Douglass eloquently exposed this Achilles heel of the young capitalist democracy as "bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy—a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages." (Rochester, New York; 1852)

The Civil War and Reconstruction represented the intensification of class struggle that resulted in the national hegemony of the Northern capitalist class. Within this, Southern dispossessed planters

were subordinated to becoming regional managers for Northern capital. After the 1877 Hayes-Tilden betrayal which pulled federal troops out of the South, farmers and artisans flirted with the revolutionary democratic themes of the period in the Populist Movement. However, they capitulated to the rule of the bourgeoisie and traded their class interests for nationality (American white) interests. Black people unleashed a profound democratic force in this period, especially in setting up free universal public education in the U.S. for the first time, for example. However, Blacks failed to fully overcome the limitations of slavery, in part because Northern capital refused to fully dismantle the old slavery social structure, and refused Blacks the material basis for "freedom" in the rural south. There was no genuine land reform, no "40 acres and a mule"!

The system of slavery was replaced by a system of farm tenancy. The ownership of land, the main means of production since agriculture was not yet mechanized, was concentrated in the hands of a few and rented out to the majority of people in farming. The most widespread method was sharecropping, i.e. paying rent with a portion of one's produce. Because political rule and land ownership were concentrated in the hands of a small regionally based white ruling elite, Blacks and, to some extent, poor whites were still forced to work, legally by peonage (forced labor due to indebtedness) and illegally by lynching and mob rule. The social rules and regulations that spelled out the oppression of Black people were formalized in the laws and customs of the South, and from there spread throughout the country.

The other major historical development is that Black people were developing a distinctive social organization, culture, and general way of life. Black people no longer had the different characteristics they had brought with them from Africa to separate them. We were objectively becoming forged into a nation, especially in the Black-belt South where most Blacks were concentrated. This meant that relations between whites and Blacks were not only defined by law and described by color (race), but had become a profound confrontation between two developing nations of people. The national development of Black people was shaped by the oppression forced on them by white people: the development of the Black nation was intensified by segregation but limited by economic exploitation.

At the dawn of the 20th century, the U.S. was transformed into a monopoly capitalist country, an imperialist state. And in this context Black people were forced to migrate from the South to the North, from rural areas to the city, from the farm to the factory. There were two patterns: (1) Some Blacks remained in the Black-belt nation and barely managed to survive in subsistence farming mainly as sharecroppers; (2) Some Blacks migrated north to the city and worked in industry.

In this contradictory pattern of historical development, the 20th century Black Liberation Movement has reflected the ideological and political forces of both nationalism and internationalism. In other words, the main trends have been and continue to be based on both an oppressed Black middle class (with "bourgeois" aspirations), and workers tied to the color-blind rigor of assembly line factory production as part of the multi-national working class. On one hand, you have the basis for nationalism: The Black middle class and its economic and political

aspirations: segregated organizations, public institutions, and neighborhoods; family ties to the Black-belt nation of the deep South; discrimination and the continuation of vicious racist attacks. On the other hand, there is a basis for internationalism the collective work experience of industrial workers, particularly in large scale industry; the impersonal characteristics of life in the modern city and the depersonalization of the rationalized bureaucracy. Both trends exist simultaneously, and both constitute the basis for struggle against racist national oppression and class exploitation in the third stage of the Black experience the factory and the metropolis of monopoly capital.

The fight for Black liberation is against the capitalist system. Only and socialism can we successfully complete this fight and achieve Black liberation. Black people will be liberated when this society is free of white supremacy, when there is no discrimination and racial double dealing. And, in those geographical areas where Black people are in a majority, and on those issues mainly concerning Black people, the control of decision-making should unquestionably be in the hands of Black people. Liberation also means the opportunity to work productively and have a full share in the material rewards of this highly industrialized society. All of this is antithetical to the domination of capitalism.

In sum, our fight for Black liberation has been waged during three major stages of development-slavery, rural agricultural and urban industrial periods. We have been faced with more and more intense capitalist punishment at every stop. The bottom line of this analysis is not only the rejection of capitalism, but the necessary analysis of and commitment to fight for socialism as the best context in which to abolish racism. Even under socialism, however, we will have to continue to fight against racism until it is finally destroyed.

2. The revolutionary struggle for Black liberation must be a fight for socialism.

This is a message we can learn from our theoretical analysis of the current world capitalist crisis, from the national liberation movements of Africa, and especially from the revolutionary history of such socialist countries as the Soviet Union under Lenin and China under Mao Tse-Tung. The main way we learn this, however, is by the scientific study of how capitalism in the U.S.A. has developed, how it has failed, and how we must fight it. In looking at Black people's relationship with capitalism, the fundamental historical point was made by Mao: "in the final analysis, national struggle (the fight against racism, for Black liberation) is a matter of class struggle (the fight against capitalism, for socialism)."

Capitalism is fatally ill. The general crisis of the capitalist system has its origins in class struggle-from within, the inevitable wars that break out between imperialist countries (like World War I); and from without by the threat to capitalism created by socialist revolutions like the 1917 Bolshevik seizure of power in the Soviet Union. The cataclysmic seizure that capitalism went through in the 1930s (the Great Depression) and the shrinking spheres of imperialist influence as a result of the success of the revolutionary national liberation struggles of the Third World (e.g., Zimbabwe) are both manifestations of class struggle. Looking at capitalist crisis historically, even

James Baldwin said it for the masses of Black people when the Civil Rights Movement was being transformed into the Black Liberation Movement: "Who wants to integrate into a burning house?"

The only historically valid alternative to capitalism is socialism. This theoretical point is subject to great debate by those who really think (rightly or wrongly!) that they have a stake in this capitalist society. Our view is clear: the enemy of the masses is the economic and political system based on the exploitation of the many by the few (dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, or capitalist class); and the solution is to destroy this system based on private profit and construct a society run collectively for the common good of everyone (dictatorship of the proletariat, or working class).

3. One of the main shortcomings of the socialist movement has been white supremacy within its own ranks.

Racism has been a major historical problem of the left or socialist movement in the U.S., and represents a reflection of the divisions created and developed by the ruling class between Black and White workers, Black and White students, and Black and White communities. In fact, white supremacy (racism) is a vicious manifestation of opportunism, i.e., one of the many ways workers unite with the ruling class against other workers. Lenin makes an appropriate point: "Opportunism and social chauvinism have con-tent, namely class collaboration." (Collected Works, Volume 22, p. 112). Lenin also put forward the correct revolutionary stand to take in our fight against this white supremacist trash in our movement:

By exposing the fact that the opportunists and social chauvinists are in reality betraying and selling out the interests of the masses, that they are defending the temporary privileges of a minority of the workers, that they are really allies and agents of the bourgeoisie, we teach the masses to appreciate their true political interests, to fight for socialism and for the revolution through all the long and painful imperialist wars and imperialist armistices. (Collected Works, Volume 23, p 120).

Concretely, in our movement there are two forms of this white supremacy: (1) the refusal to recognize the revolutionary side of the Black nationalist movement, and (2) the uncritical support of Black nationalism while preserving socialist theory for a mostly "white" movement. The first is a direct attack against the revolutionary nationalist aspect of the Black Liberation Movement, while the other condescendingly recognizes nationalism, but effectively liquidates its revolutionary side by accepting virtually all of it in an uncritical way. These are opposite poles of the same white supremacist stupidity. The history of the left is filled with such examples. However, these errors can be used negatively, as something to avoid, to establish a good line on Black liberation and revolutionary unity, and revolutionary leadership of the Black Liberation Movement.

4. In fighting against opportunism and white supremacy, the new Marxist movement has to guard against dogmatism.

This is one of the main problems to be faced, fighting a right error with a "left" error. Opportunism leads one to revise Marxist principles based on the so-called special and particular character of the U.S... In other words, for opportunists the main thing is that the the U.S.A is an exceptional case. Dogmatism can result from fighting this opportunism by relying too exclusively on the classics of Marxist theory (i.e., universal principles) rather than rooting theory in the "concrete analysis of concrete things." Mao Tse Tung sums up this error of dogmatism in a way useful to quote in this context:

Where our dogmatists err on this question is that, on the one hand, they do not understand that we have to study the particularity of contradictions and know the particular essence of individual things before we can adequately know the universality of contradictions and the common essence of things, we must go further and study the concrete things that have not yet been thoroughly studied or have only just emerged. Our dogmatists are lazy-bones. They refuse to undertake a painstaking study of concrete things; they regard general truths as emerging out of the void; they turn them into purely abstract unfathomable formulas and thereby completely deny and reverse the normal sequence by which man comes to know truth. (Selected Works, Volume I, page 321)

Over the last 10 years, the new Marxist movement has had to return to the classics in order to successfully fight the revisionist garbage of the U.S. exceptionalism line, and correctly so. There has been a tremendous surge of interest in Marxist theory sparked by the revolutionary inspiration of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution of China, and the political necessity created by the shortcomings of the mass movements of the 1960s.

However, this had led to a lazy-bones approach. Rather than Marxism being a guide to analysis and action in relation to the concrete conditions of the U.S. right now, it has frequently been ossified as some sort of eternally valid holy dogma to be worshiped a new religion. This is bullshit! We need Marxism because we need the development of revolutionary theory, the strategy and tactics of making a revolution. As Lenin put it, "Without revolutionary theory, there can be no revolution." Moreover, "The living soul of Marxism is the concrete analysis of concrete things."

5. In fighting against white supremacy and "left" dogmatism, the Black Liberation Movement must guard against narrow nationalism.

Black people have had the historical experience of being molded into a (Black-belt) nation, have had an insecure middle class with grand aspirations, and continue to suffer the attacks of racism and discrimination. It is understandable, therefore, that a significant sector of Black people have maintained a nationalist posture, though it has seldom been the dominant trend in the movement for Black liberation.

It is important to keep a clear understanding of two different Black nationalist tendencies: one is reactionary and serves as a tool of capitalist rule, while the other is revolutionary and serves as a force to galvanize Black people into an effective strike force against the rule of capital. Dogmatism

feeds the reactionary trend since it actually walls off the socialist movement from the Black masses making Marxism appear as an alien thing in which the European god of Christianity (Jesus) is replaced by a European god of socialism (Marx). The United Front Against Imperialism is not based only on adherents to Marxism, but is much broader and bigger than that. Marxists, workers, the Black liberation movement, other classes, and other movements of oppressed people are all included. The central unity is being against imperialism and following the leadership of the most advanced and consistently revolutionary force in the fight for socialism—the working class represented by its political party.

White nationalism is the same as white supremacy and therefore is totally reactionary. In the U.S.A., white nationalism is the nationalism of the oppressor nation and therefore must be combatted. This is different than Black nationalism, since Black nationalism is the reaction of an oppressed nationality. White supremacy is the offensive attack of national oppression, while Black nationalism is the defensive reaction of an oppressed nationality fighting back.

A significant historical prism through which we can understand this distinction between the nationalism of an oppressor nation and that of an oppressed nation is the life, thought, and political practice of Malcolm X. The historical roots of this question go back to the 1920s when the African Blood Brotherhood moved from being the left wing of the Garvey movement into the Marxist movement. Overall, we must maintain a dialectical materialist method in understanding the positive and negative features of Afro-American nationalism.

6. Marxist Theory is an immediate strategic necessity for the Black Liberation Movement.

Throughout the 1960s, the Black Liberation Movement was soaring; wave upon wave of people thrust themselves spontaneously into struggle. The issues, slogans and symbols of the movement were generally taken up by the broad masses of people. However, the major shortcoming of this movement was its lack of consistent revolutionary leadership. This means that there was and is a need essence of revolutionary leadership. There have been severe historical limitations in overcoming this spontaneity of the Black Liberation Movement including the petty bourgeois opportunism of Black intellectuals, and the decisive structural changes that have kept transforming the overall character of the Black community (from rural South to urban North and South).

What is the solution? And how can these limitations be over-come? First, we must recognize that while the above are limitations, they must also be transformed into strengths. Only a revolutionary theory can transform facts into a consciousness pointing the way from capitalism toward socialist revolution. Only revolutionary theory can transform the generalized reactions of Black intellectuals against racist national oppression (most of which are valid into a revolutionary force accurately summing up the political, economic and social problems faced by the masses of Black people.

Only revolutionary theory can accurately define the working class character of the masses of Black people. Marxism is the basis for this revolutionary theory that we so desperately need.

Many young intellectuals, in the university and cultural-artistic settings, are turning to Marxism because the message of ruling class intellectuals simply doesn't make sense when they try to explain the current capitalist crisis. And if the ideas of the ruling class don't work now, people are led to question whether they ever worked (past) or ever could work (future). In this context, however, it is important to recognize that most forms of academic Marxism that have been accepted on campuses have liquidated the revolutionary parts of Marxism. The key is that Marxism is the science for the masses of people to use in changing the world. With this orientation (toward revolutionary change, practice, etc.), many young people are grasping firmly the need for revolutionary theory. Marxism is the basis for developing the theory that we need. It is a necessary point of departure.

The following is from a pamphlet published by People's College in Chicago in 1980, introducing a new journal they were about to go to press with called "Introducing...Marxism and Black Liberation A New Theoretical Journal". The pamphlet included lots of information about the aims, goals, and why the journal was being published. The journal was nicknamed MAYBELL. The article presented here was written by the Editorial Collective. This edition published by Red Machete.

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